

Doctors' Rx: Make a plan to manage kids' media use

Michelle Healy, USA TODAY 9:30 a.m. EDT October 28, 2013

Many families have few rules around their children's media use and the digital age is the ideal time to initiate a change, the American Academy of Pediatrics says.



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In an age when exposure to TV, smartphones, computers, tablets, and all forms of social media play a dominant role in the lives of American kids and teens, many families have very few rules in place to manage their children's media use. But for their well-being, that should change, the nation's largest group of children's physicians advises.

In a newly revised policy statement released today, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents make a media use plan (<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/How-to-Make-a-Family-Media-Use-Plan.aspx>) for their families that takes into account not only the quantity, but the quality and location of media used, and includes mealtime and bedtime curfews for media devices. It also encourages keeping all screen media (TVs, computers, tablets, etc.) out of kids' bedrooms.

The group reiterates its recommendation to limit the amount of total entertainment screen time to less than two hours a day and to discourage all screen media exposure for children under age 2.

A new, nationally representative survey from the nonprofit advocacy group Common Sense Media (<http://www.commonsensemedia.org/>), also out today, shows 72% of kids ages 8 and under have used a mobile device for some type of media activity such as playing games, watching videos or using apps, up from 38% just two years ago. And 17% of these young children use a mobile device on a daily basis.

"We are worried that a lot of parents are clueless about their kids' media use and how to manage it appropriately," says Victor Strasburger, a professor of pediatrics at the University of New Mexico and co-author of the AAP policy statement, released at the group's national conference in Orlando, Fla.

They are "spending more time with media than they are in school. They are spending more time with media than in any activity other than sleeping. You could make the argument that media have taken over the primary role of teaching kids from schools and parents in many cases," says Strasburger.

Parents, together with pediatricians, schools, research organizations, the entertainment and advertising industries and government, need to work together to do more to address this issue, he says. He adds that the federal government has not written a comprehensive report on children and the media since 1982, before the widespread use of the Internet and cellphones.

According to findings cited in the policy statement:

- The average 8- to 10-year-old spends nearly eight hours a day with a variety of media; older children and teens spend more than 11 hours a day.
- The presence of a television set in a child's bedroom increases TV viewing even more, and 71% of children and teens report having a TV in their bedroom; 50% have a console video game player in their room.
- Nearly all children and teens (84%) are on-line; about 75% of 12- to 17-year-olds have a cellphone, up from 45% in 2004; 88% use text messaging.

Last updated five years ago, the policy statement considered a wealth of new research. It says the pediatrics group "continues to be concerned by evidence about the potential harmful effects of media messages and images."

Excessive media use has been associated with obesity, lack of sleep, school problems, aggression and other behavior issues, the statement says.

But it adds that "important positive and pro-social effects of media should also be recognized." It specifies that media can help children of all ages learn important academic material, and can also help "teach empathy, racial and ethnic tolerance, and a whole range of interpersonal skills."

"Media can be good or bad," says Strasburger. "There's some extraordinarily good media out there. It's a matter of finding the right stuff for the right aged child or teen and limiting access to inappropriate media."

But parents need to recognize that their children are "facing a tsunami of media," he says.

The onslaught of new digital devices to deliver that media makes the challenge of monitoring your children's "media diet" harder than ever, says Jim Steyer, CEO of Common Sense Media. Not only is there more of it, but "because these devices are mobile, screen time moves with them from room to room. It's not as easy to monitor use."

Among other recommendations in the revised policy statement:

For Parents:

- Model effective media use to help children learn to be selective and healthy in what they consume. Take an active role in children's media education by co-viewing TV, movies and videos with them and discuss important family values.
- Monitor what media your children are using and accessing, including any websites they are visiting and social media sites they may be using

For pediatricians:

- At every well-child visit, ask how much time the child is spending with media and if there is a TV or Internet-connected device in the child's bedroom.
- Take a more detailed media history with children or teens at risk for obesity, aggression, tobacco or substance use, or school problems.

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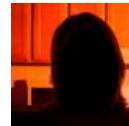
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